OBITUARY

Arthur George Alphonso

A deep love of plants led Arthur George Alphonso to pursue studies at the Serdang Agricultural College and thence to his appointment as Horticultural Assistant with the Singapore Botanic Gardens on 1 January 1940. In 1954, the Gardens sponsored him for a two-year training course at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kews. He returned to assume the position of Gardens' Curator. George Alphonso developed a rewarding lifelong career with the Gardens, rising through the ranks to be its chief administrator before his retirement in 1976.

Upon his first appointment, he worked in the grounds, but during the WW II Japanese occupation of Singapore, was placed in charge of the potting yard. This was essentially the nursery and technical support area for the Gardens. Early experimental research and simple planting trials were carried out in the potting yard, with one of the mainstays being plant introduction. An estimated 80% of the plant species cultivated for roadside planting and in home gardens in the 1960s were introduced through the efforts of the Gardens. This was actively built up by George through an active plant exchange programme with other botanical institutions and personal contacts that he had established all over the world. Gardening enthusiasts, especially from the Australian, African and South American tropics, often stopped by the Gardens to share information and exciting new plant material they had discovered.

The Gardens' collections relied on and grew steadily with this goodwill exchange programme. There was scarce funding for things botanical and horticultural in those times, as the nation had more pressing issues to address. As the collections grew and were successfully propagated, the Gardens found itself with surplus plant material, which could be shared with the gardening community in Singapore, and a plant sales nursery was established for the public. Gardening advice was frequently sought from the Gardens' staff and as Curator, George was the main contact for the public. He was acknowledged as Singapore's expert in the field. When Singapore embarked on its enlightened greening programme and its Garden City Campaign, George Alphonso was among the pioneers instrumental in its successful implementation. Hundreds of thousands of planting material was produced by the Gardens and supplied *gratis* to government departments, schools, charitable institutions and other official organizations for Singapore's initial greening efforts.

Interest in gardening had always featured significantly among



George Alphonso with Queen Elizabeth II when she visited the Gardens in 1972. A VIP orchid, *Dendrobium* Elizabeth, a hybrid developed by the Singapore Botanic Gardens, was named in her honour.

Singaporeans. Those who could afford gardens were always keen to add new species or hybrids to their collection; others flocked to flower shows to admire the landscapes and prize blooms proudly displayed by the growers. Annual flower shows were eagerly anticipated, and the Singapore Botanic Gardens actively co-ordinated these shows, with George Alphonso taking on the role of Show Manager, and subsequently Judge, for many decades. The staging of the shows wrought a close bonding and camaraderie among the growers, hobbyists and professionals and inculcated an appreciation of plants in the visitors. George was active in the Singapore Gardening Society and the Malayan Orchid Society, Singapore Branch, where he served as both President and Editor of the *Malayan Orchid Review*. He was kept busy especially when there was both an Orchid and a Garden Show held in the same year.

George's professional interest in orchids grew progressively from the early fifties. Expeditions to the surrounding forests brought him into close proximity with this fascinating family of plants, and his interest could only grow as he gained more exposure to the range of forms and natural habitat of the plants. Orchid hybridisation was already an important aspect of research in the Gardens, with the precedence set by such eminent

botanists as RE Holttum and GH Addison. George Alphonso sustained the Gardens' special interest and furthered its reputation as a world famous garden for the collection and conservation of orchid species and for producing many award winning hybrids. He forged close friendships with other orchid enthusiasts at local and international events and became much sought after as a judge at orchid shows as his name and reputation grew entwined with that of the Singapore orchid world. George's counsel was elicited when Singapore decided to have a national flower, and his advised choice of *Vanda* Miss Joaquim was accepted.

George Alphonso's long tenure with the Gardens will be fondly remembered by those who have worked with him. His was an era when the grounds were inspected on foot and hands-on advice was shared with the staff. His world was that of open skies and field, and he had little patience with air-conditioned meeting rooms. He felt that the world of plants and the solutions to their problems were best dealt with where they thrives – outdoors.

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